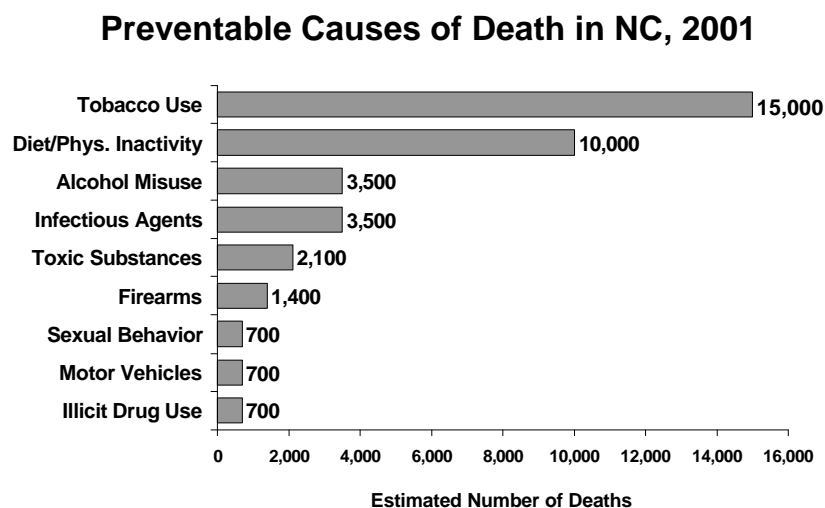


Preventable Causes of Death in North Carolina

Causes of death are traditionally classified according to the primary type of disease or injury. For example, in 2001 the leading causes of death in North Carolina were heart disease, cancer, stroke, chronic lung disease, and diabetes. Causes of death may also be classified in terms of preventable risk factors – such as smoking, unhealthy diet, and sexual behavior – which contribute to a number of different diseases. Such risk factors are usually not recorded directly on death certificates. Some studies have estimated the proportion of deaths due to various preventable causes.^{1,2} By applying proportions adapted from these studies to the 71,000 deaths of North Carolina residents during 2001, we come up with the following results:



From this perspective, the leading preventable causes of death in North Carolina are tobacco use (21% of all deaths), unhealthy diet and physical inactivity (14%), alcohol misuse (5%), infectious agents (5%), and toxic substances (environmental, occupational, food/water; 3%). The categories shown in the chart indicate the primary preventable cause of death, and they are mutually exclusive (for example, the deaths attributed to motor vehicles do not include those attributed to alcohol misuse). Most of these causes are related to health behaviors. These 37,600 deaths represent 53 percent of all North Carolina deaths in 2001, suggesting that more than half of all deaths in the state each year are potentially preventable if risk factors were properly addressed.

It should be noted that these are rough estimates, based on evidence from other studies. Nevertheless, they indicate that reducing or eliminating preventable risk factors could add many years of life for North Carolina residents. Strategies to achieve this goal should include educating the public on the importance of healthy behaviors and providing the skills and environment necessary to choose and maintain these behaviors.

¹Remington PL. Preventable causes of death in Wisconsin. *Wisconsin Medical Journal*, March 1994.

²McGinnis JM, Foege WH. Actual causes of death in the United States. *JAMA* 1993; 270:2207-2212.

An earlier version of this material appeared in the July/August 2002 issue of the North Carolina Medical Journal. The present version, updated to reflect 2001 death statistics, appears here by permission of the Journal.